

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Office of Current Intelligence
19 June 1963

CURRENT INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Military Situation in Laos

1. Communist forces in Laos over the past four months have applied intimidation, subversion, and small-scale military operations to take control of virtually the entire Plaine des Jarres and most of south-central Laos from neutralist commander Kong Le.

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3. Deterioration of the neutralist position began in mid-February with the assassination of Kong Le's field commander, Colonel Ketsana. This was followed in mid-March by the defection of two Kong Le battalions under Col. Deuane.

4. The first significant Pathet Lao military move was a successful attack on Kong Le's Xieng Khouang headquarters on 5-6 April. Under continuing Pathet Lao pressure, Kong Le gave up Ban Ban, Khang Khay, and Phong Savan northeast of the Plaine along Route 7, Tha Thom southeast of the Plaine, and was forced to pull his headquarters back to Muong Phanh on the western side of the Plaine. (Tha Thom,

DIA review(s) completed.

however, is reportedly now secured by Lao army troops.) The principal Plaine des Jarres airfield now is subject to interdiction by the Pathet Lao. Kong Le, dependent on air support, is restricted to a strip at Muong Phan and another at his rearward base, Muong Kheung north of the Plaine.

5. In the past month the Pathet Lao have pushed neutralist forces out of Muong Phine, Mahaxay, and Lak Sao, towns in south-central Laos astride or near the routes through Laos from North Vietnam into South Vietnam. Nhommarath, the main neutralist position in this area, has also been largely evacuated. Shelling has been resumed in the Plaine, where neutralist positions on the southern and northern edges are under attack.

6. In northern Laos, the relatively independent neutralist General Khamouane has 2,000 troops centered around Phong Saly but has refused to move to Kong Le's assistance. Rightist General Phoumi, however, has moved five infantry battalions, weapons, supplies, officers and technicians to the Plaine des Jarres to support Kong Le. Pathet Lao leader Prince Souphannouvong has taken advantage of this movement, and of the use of US commercial planes to help supply Kong Le, to assume the public stance of the injured party in the Plaine des Jarres fighting and pose unacceptable conditions for new talks with Premier Souvanna.

7. The fighting in the Plaine des Jarres has been neither major nor severe, but its implications are serious. The Pathet Lao have agreed to several temporary cease-fires, but continue to "nibble" at Kong Le positions while conducting sweeps against some 6,000 Meo tribal guerrillas attempting to disrupt Pathet Lao lines of communication around the fringes of the Plaine and along the roads back to North Vietnam. Kong Le's plans to counterattack to regain his position have either been blunted at the outset or called off by the reluctance of Souvanna to give his endorsement. As long as the Pathet Lao nibbling is successful, the Communists would see little need for a full-scale resumption of civil war.

8. As long as Souvanna and Souphannouvong, agreed in principle on the need for talks, remain

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at odds over conditions, prospects for a negotiated settlement are remote. The gap between Souvanna and his neutralists on the one hand and the Communists on the other is widening. Hanoi refers to the dissidents who defected from Kong Le as the "true neutralists," and Souvanna in early June for the first time charged publicly that North Vietnamese are fighting on the Pathet Lao side. The neutralist premier now threatens to dismiss his abortive coalition cabinet of all three factions, and form a new government without Pathet Lao representation.

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Any estimate of the total, however, can be little more than extrapolation or projection from this information. We estimated that there were 10,000 North Vietnamese in Laos when the Geneva agreement was concluded in July, 1962. Some 5,000 were withdrawn in the ensuing three months, largely to bivouac areas just across the border from which they could return easily, quickly, and largely unobserved. Some have probably done so since the resumption of fighting in the Plaine des Jarres. The Defense Intelligence Order of Battle for North Vietnamese in Laos has just been raised to 8,000.

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11. Our present Order of Battle for Laos shows 50,000 Laotian army forces, 17,000 Meo guerrillas, 3,500 Kong Le forces, and 2,000 questionable neutralists of Khamouane, against 19,500 Pathet Lao,

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8,000 North Vietnamese, and about 450 dissident neutralists. In the Plaine des Jarres an estimated 2,000 Laotian army forces, 2,000 Kong Le, and 6,000 Meo--a total of 10,000--confront 4,000 Pathet Lao, some 1,500 North Vietnamese, and the 450 dissidents--a total of 5,950. The Communist forces are better organized and better supplied, being able to rely on road transportation with the monsoon season starting.

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